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John Wayne and Forrest Gump, Strange Bedfellows: The Influential and Reflective Media Loop

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Call Broadhead

John Wayne and Forrest Gump, Strange Bedfellows:
The Influential and Reflective Media Loop
Matt Nixon

Whittle Scholar Senior Project
Dr. Wheeler
May 5, 1995

Which came first, the chicken or the egg? This age^{old} question has never been indisputably answered. A modern-day manifestation of this question is the debate over the proactive versus reactive nature of the media. Some (usually conservative public figures) claim that the media is controlled by a "liberal cultural elite" that has some liberal agenda. Others (typically those in the media business) dispute this, saying that they are either only entertaining or only showing what is already going on. This conundrum is clearly illustrated by the ongoing debate over the effects and purposes of violence in the media. Does depicting violence desensitize the population to violence and/or glorify it, making the country more violent, or does the media merely reflect what is already going on? This can be logically debated and factually supported by both sides. However, the debate is fundamentally rooted in the question of what are the actual effects of the media on the popular and public culture of a society.

The typical standard used in analyzing media effects is a positive versus negative effects criteria--otherwise known as an optimistic versus pessimistic dichotomy. The optimistic approach is based on the notion that as cognizant, thinking creatures, humans can see useful and/or educational benefits of the media and interpret them into an experience that can be utilized as needed while the useless aspects can be consciously or unconsciously discarded (Cook, 227). This is a commonly accepted notion that is similar to the uses and gratifications model of mass communication. The pessimistic view of media effects is rooted in the idea that humans can be easily persuaded and manipulated by a constant bombardment of relatively consistent messages. Purveyors of this approach see

Charles Brackton Brown,
Wieland

the mass media as doubly dangerous because, not only are people easily manipulated, but also ^{the} the mass media (television in particular) anesthetizes the masses and ^{thus} strips them of their only defense against this force--their critical thinking skills.

Despite conflicting opinions on the effects of the mass media, there is general accord on the fact that mass media consumption is a passive undertaking (Cook, 227). This view is ^{difficult} ~~tough~~ to dispute because, by its nature, feedback is virtually impossible. However, the absence of feedback has opposite interpretations. Jean Baudrillard sees silence as the masses' only line of defense against the powerful arm of the media (Cook, 230). He views the media producers as modern-day carpetbaggers who demand to know what the public wants in order to exploit it. By giving feedback, the public subjects ^{itself?} themselves to further exploitation. Only by not giving feedback can people protect themselves. They disappear and, thus, become impossible to locate, read and manipulate (Cook, 230). Certainly an unusual tilt on the question.

Though certainly containing a subversive element, silence is nearly impossible to achieve ^{or?} and interpret. Conventional feedback and exchange as it occurs in dyads or small groups is nearly impossible in mass communication. However, feedback often is obtained without the majority of the population actively engaging in it. Nielsen ratings and movie box office grosses are used to judge the popularity of an offering without a single person ever being asked to express a thoughtful opinion about the piece of work. In order to achieve real subversion, everyone would have to remain silent--an exceedingly unrealistic

expectation. Furthermore, since opinions are never solicited, the players in the media take it upon themselves to attribute motives and attitudes to fill in the gaps. For example, when a studio movie does well below the studio executives' expectations, a variety of explanations are offered by every possible source. Additionally, the motives attributed by a given media source are often ends-oriented and self-serving. This point is illustrated well by last Fall's commercially disappointing *Natural Born Killers*. Pat Robertson may have claimed ^{that} it failed because it was a vile, violent, anti-social film that Americans rejected because it went against their traditional morals. The studio may have complained its failure was due to its lack of famous "star power." Director Oliver Stone may feel it didn't do well because the studio didn't support it when it came under controversy. Film critics possibly felt that Americans "just didn't get it." It is evident that the number of motives attributed to its failure are numerous and, ultimately, mere conjecture. Silence is rarely an effective tool of subversion because those who are being subverted merely "fill in the blanks" with whatever suits their ends.

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record:
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def's
jargon

How about that
it was a lousy
film?

Baudrillard's concept of silence as subversion also stands diametrically opposed to the activist view that silence means tacit approval. If a wrong in the status quo is not addressed, then it will probably continue. Rather than subverting those in power, silence bolsters them and allows them to continue. For example, the media's perpetuation of racial and gender stereotypes would continue unfettered without concerned, dissenting voices. Those who view stereotypes as a means of oppression must speak up to point out the existence of these

Nixon's
(Richard
Nixon's)
"silent
majority"

That's a
3rd alternative
Isn't it?

stereotypes or it will continue. In this case, silence would have no subversive worth because perpetrators of continuing stereotypes, save maybe Ku Klux Klan propagandists, are simply utilizing accessible constructs common in fiction rather than consciously demeaning a demographic group (Seiter, 23.) Therefore, those who are concerned must offer feedback despite the absence of traditional communication exchange channels.

Hub?

The discussion of the most effective methods of responding and/or subverting the media, once again, returns the focus to the actual or potential effects of the media. By simply addressing and evaluating methods of feedback and response, there is a *de facto* acknowledgment of its power to effect people and a tacit admission to its potential detrimental effects. After all, if the media can effect people's attitudes, it can do so positively and negatively equally.

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of?

Not sure this is true. And even if it is, so what? ITAL

Therefore, accepting its persuasive potential, the issue of a proactive versus reactive media agenda returns to the focus. However, an easy answer does not exist.

Though often overlooked by cultural analysts, any discussion of media agenda must begin and end at two basic facts. First, the primary goal of the media is to make money. Second, in order to keep the media machine going,

Not true at all

new fuel must always be added. The former is self explanatory. Advertisements provide the lifeline for any commercial product. They offer symbolic messages that attempt to alter the viewer's sense of identification through discretionary consumption (Hirschman, 344). The profit motive results in the reality that a piece of work, no matter how socially uplifting or socially destructive, will not be

But you assume that all the media is commercial

"Jargon Educando"

PBS
NPR
BBC

made or aired if it won't sell. The latter requires more explanation. When the ability to instantly transmit messages all over the world was realized, messages had to be created in order to utilize the technology (Bellah, 148). As technologies have improved and proliferated, new messages must be constantly created in order justify the existence of that technology. This necessity results in anything new that can be revealed or conjectured is instantly consumed by millions of people. However, since there is such competition between media sources, the entertainment imperative is always increasing. A man sitting behind a desk and reading the newspaper gave way to the much more visually stimulating use of eye-catching graphics and on-location film footage. This progression continues and, thus, the news must offer more stories in the same amount of time and get the stories first, even if that means reporting on rumors and accusations. However, the network news was still not interesting enough, so tabloid "news" programs were spawned to feed the viewing audience's insatiable hunger for stories with age-old Shakespearean themes like lust, greed and betrayal (Garber, 48). As they increase in popularity, "hard news" programs must follow suit in order to capture the viewing audience's attention and, hopefully, their money. This profit imperative, coupled with the insatiable appetite of the media monster, is the only explanation for why respected news reporters like Tom Brokaw and Connie Chung ever uttered the names of Joey Buttafuoco, Lorena Bobbitt and Tonya Harding.

This progression has resulted in a line-blurring between education and entertainment. Fiction has become a reality (Garber, 49). This is dangerous

2 definitions of that term

The man
gave way

Shakespeare
is "age-old"?
Then what are
the Sumerian
tablets?

You assume
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AMB

its?

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because it places very unrealistic expectations on people. The ideal family of *Leave it to Beaver* have left women who grew up watching the show feeling as if that is the standard they must live up to, even though they never actually lived like that (Coontz, 34). As popular media has become ever more entrenched, these false expectations have lingered accordingly. After women spent the 1960's trying to usurp these traditional roles, they have found great stress in reconciling their instilled values of "home" and "motherhood" with the ideals they fought for (Coontz, 164). Strident social critics have maintained that this inner conflict has, in part, led to the exponential increase of divorce rates in the 1970's and 1980's. The chasm created by the conflicting images of June Cleaver and Murphy Brown is nearly unbridgeable (Paglia, 35). The stress between media portrayals of reality and individual reality can take a much more malignant form, also. Anorexia and Bulimia strike women almost solely (Wolf, 181). These diseases' incidences were negligible until the rise of mass media. The causal link between the media proliferation of uniform beauty images and eating disorders in women is anything but tenuous or coincidental (Wolf, 184).

Taking an even more apocalyptic view of the effects of the mass media, Neil Postman feels that as American media consumers, we are "amusing ourselves to death" (Postman, 13). By making education and entertainment indistinguishable, teachers now have to make their classroom more entertaining than *Sesame Street*--an impossible expectation. Quick-cut television news and *USA Today* ("The Nation's Newspaper") have made it a necessity for every story to be told in 30 seconds or less, thus, making public discourse, the very

AMB

I'll go
Along,
ALTHOUGH
THERE IS NO
PROOF. See
JS Reed and
White Southern
birth rates
after 1954.
Cause-effect?

foundation of American public policy, impossible (Postman, 17). In a compelling analogy, Postman illustrates the real threat to America not as an Orwellian "Big Brother," but in the "soma" described by Aldous Huxley in his prescient novel, *Brave New World*. The "soma" was the way Americans were controlled--by inflicting pleasure on themselves (Postman, 14-15). Postman sees television as Huxley's "soma."

Given the media's enormous and far-reaching power, those in control of the machine should, logically, be the ones with the power. With the detrimental ideas of the media's power to Postman's apocalyptic view of media effects on American as a whole, malevolent people must hold the reigns of the media. However, it seems as if, in reality, the worst the media gatekeepers can be convicted of is untamed avarice and gross negligence without malice. They try to use a "magic bullet" that hits as many people as possible for the sole purpose of mining the maximum riches from the masses. If obese models would sell magazines, everyone would use them. In this mining, the media sometimes hit, while, often, they miss completely. The big hits are when the "bullet" goes right through the center of America and transverses all population demographics. Occasionally, they hit tangentially, which is profitable and significant. When the media misses with the "bullet," its shot rarely registers on the radar. It's a "crap-shoot," yet, when there's a hit, they try to continually recreate that success until it misses and something else hits. Cultural attitudes change independently of the media, until a piece of work resonates with the population as a whole. This causes a change in media offerings, thus changing media effects on the masses,

thus, once again, altering the next media hit. This circular pattern creates a mechanism that has eluded science--a perpetual motion machine.

The media's depiction of the war in Vietnam offers a perfect example of how the media constantly changes to keep up with popular contemporary ideas and how those changes effect American culture. Nine seminal films show the complete circle American attitudes towards the War, its veterans, and its effect on America has traveled. These films are *The Green Berets* (1968), *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Coming Home* (1978), *Apocalypse Now* (1978), *First Blood* (1982), *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985), *Platoon* (1986), *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), and *Forrest Gump* (1994).

Work of Jameson?

In the face of ever-growing disdain for the war in Vietnam, John Wayne, America's greatest movie patriot, initiated the filming of *The Green Berets*. He received U.S. Department of Defense funding and all access usage of government equipment props for his pro-war epic. In fact, the government actually provided the entire cast with military regulation fatigues as a show of support. In one scene, an indignant Wayne chastises an obviously anti-war reporter by justifying U.S. military intervention by, in essence saying, "It's the right thing to do." Wayne used the same formula that was so popular in his World War II film epics. However, this time, the formula not only didn't resonate with the American public, but also was seen as a joke. Wayne's film seemed anachronistic and out of touch. Considering this movie was released only one year before *Easy Rider*, the hugely popular counterculture film, it is not hard to see why this film didn't resonate with the public.

reviews?
polls?
Proof?

box of receipts for both?

No proof at all — no sales figures, no reviews, no polls, nothing from Vanity. Indeed, —


Absolutely NOT TRUE. Reviewers and viewers clearly saw the film "Little Big man" (1970) as a Vietnam-inspired film. And there are more.

Possibly due to a necessary recovery period, the early and mid 1970's were conspicuously void of significant Vietnam-themed movies. 1978, however, produced two very important films on the topic. *Coming Home*, starring Jon Voight and "Hanoi" Jane Fonda, dealt with the damage the war did to those that fought in it. The war's justification was only dealt with at the very beginning by crippled vets in V.A. hospital discussing what they felt had been gained, to which the obvious conclusion was that nothing was gained. Fonda plays the wife of Bruce Dern's violent Vietnam vet Army officer. Dern played the role of the violent, crazed, permanently scarred Vietnam veteran--a prevalent stereotype in films, originated and owned by Robert DiNiro's Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver*. Voight, paralyzed from the waist down in the line of duty, was bitter and alienated until he fell in love with Fonda, the dutiful wife and V.A. hospital volunteer. Fonda's love saved Voight from going down the road Dern took. This redemption led Voight to the logical self-actualization and peace derived from his speaking to school children against the war in Vietnam. Dern's lack of salvation drove him to suicide. This set up an obvious "either/or" message of the paths vets can take after "coming home." So ?

Another return-from-the-war movie was *The Deer Hunter*, which won five Oscars, including Best Picture. This film follows a group of friends from their small Pennsylvania steel town to Vietnam and back. There are, in retrospect, the stock Vietnam vet characters. The crippled one, John Savage, has a wife that doesn't know how to treat him any more. He is the "angry, disillusioned alcoholic" of the bunch. Robert DiNiro plays the stoic, silent vet who tries to sort

out his friends' experiences. Christopher Walken (who won the Best Actor Oscar for his role) takes the crazed vet role to unbelievable, yet haunting, new heights. DiNiro goes back to Vietnam to try to locate Walken and finds him in a back alley bar playing Russian roulette for money. The closing scene summarizes the crux of the film's message. DiNiro's friends who stayed at home during the war throw him a welcome back party. They toast him, and, as a detached, confused DiNiro looks on, they sing a (ostensibly unintentional) dirge-like rendition of "God Bless America." This crystallizes the film's theme--the damage the Vietnam War did to America was greater than the damage inflicted on Vietnamese soil. This would be a prevailing theme in Vietnam movies.

1979 brought what many refer to as **THE** Vietnam movie--*Apocalypse Now*. From the title and opening credits (set to The Doors' dirge "The End"), it is evident that this would be a horrific indictment of the war and the people who fought in it. Based on Joseph Conrad's novel, *Heart of Darkness*, this film portrays Martin Sheen's disillusioned Army captain's decent into Cambodia to complete his order to kill Marlon Brando, a renegade Army colonel who has made himself the pagan god of a group of villagers. Director Francis Ford Coppola paints all the American soldiers as cruel, pot-smoking kids who laugh as they burn down an entire village. As the film progresses and Sheen sinks deeper into his journey, the events become more surreal and violent. Upon arriving at Brando's "kingdom," Sheen is greeted by Dennis Hopper, a deranged photographer who is enamored by Brando's power--despite the rows of decapitated heads stuck on the end of poles leading up to the castle. This is an

obvious statement that Brando was no more crazy in his personal battle than the rest of the war was. Brando's final words, "the horror, the horror," delivers Coppola's entire film message. Though considered by many to be the seminal Vietnam epic, Vietnam vets usually despise the film because they see it as a personal attack on the soldiers and its generally unrealistic (Lanning, 169).  Though unrepentantly biased, morose, and pessimistic, *Apocalypse Now* can be seen in retrospect as an act of cathartic bloodletting.

Hugely popular, though critically hated, *First Blood* signaled an important shift in Vietnam-themed films. Sylvester Stallone's John Rambo, a Green Beret and former Vietnam POW, was the first of the crazed Vietnam vet-as-superhero. After wandering into the small town of Hope (ironically, the same name of anti-war President Clinton's home town) Rambo is harassed by a local sheriff. He begins to suffer from "flashbacks" that result in his killing members of the National Guard. In the end, the townspeople surround him, and he lets them know that he just wants to be left alone. They decide to do so upon the wishes of Rambo's former commander, Richard Crenna. This movie is the first time the vet strikes back against America and is portrayed as the sympathetic hero. This time, the vet exacts revenge against the country for its injustices--instead of vice versa.

Just as *First Blood* was the Vietnam vet's revenge on America, *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, was the vet's revenge on Vietnam. This time, Rambo is sent by Crenna (reprising his role from the first film) to rescue some POW's still being held in Vietnam. In this film, Rambo is a veritable superhero--even more so than

9

Use either
characters >
names or
actors > names,
but don't
MIX

9

— Cong. Robt. Dornan
calls this "Spittoon"

changing popular opinion about the Vietnam War. Though seemingly as different as beef jerky and filet mignon, the Rambo movies and the Stone films share common base properties. Where the Rambo movies were a cartoonish cathartic bloodletting for patriotism, the Stone films were thoughtful re-analyses of what the costs and effects of the war were. Furthermore, they both shared the theme that the soldiers are heroes and the government was the sole source of blame.

Platoon, winner of four Oscars (including Best Picture) is primarily characterized by the notion that in Vietnam there was no easy black-or-white issues. Charlie Sheen's Army private goes on a personal journey from a gung-ho, naive private grunt to a blood-thirsty killer and, then, returns as a profoundly changed but sane vet. His platoon consisted of stereotypical pot-smokers, crazed gunners and rapists--much like those depicted in previous Vietnam films. However, there were, also, good soldiers who stopped the cruel ones from committing atrocities. In the end, mutiny occurs as Sheen rids the platoon of Tom Berenger's evil command. This illustrates Oliver Stone's theme of the patriot as objector--if the cause is unjust, it need not be supported.

This theme continues in 1989's *Born on the Fourth of July*, which can be viewed as Stone's "*Platoon* comes home." Semi-autobiographical, this film depicts the life of Ron Kovic--portrayed here by Tom Cruise. Kovic, born on the Fourth of July, stands as an allegory for America. Vietnam served as an end of innocence for Kovic, as well as the nation. He returns from war a paraplegic, not to ticker tape parades like his father did from World War II, but to a fragmented

nation that despised him, or, at best, pitied him. His descent into despair does not begin in Vietnam, but rather, once he returns home. The government does not take care of him. His family does not understand him. His friends do not know how to act towards him. The majority of people his age berate him. Kovic becomes a bitter, resentful, self-absorbed alcoholic. His personal journey hits bottom in the memorable scene where he and a fellow vet paraplegic (played by *Platoon*-alum, Willem Dafoe) end up stranded in a desert in Mexico. From there, Kovic has a slow redemption that is ushered along by his finding his role in society--as a Vietnam vet war protester. Once again, Stone preaches the theme of the patriot-as-objector. America as manifested by Ron Kovic can be healed only by making others see, and do what is right.

The idea of doing what is right has never been more idealistically portrayed than in the film *Forrest Gump* (winner of the Best Picture Oscar). Tom Hanks portrays the title character, an idiot savant who is the best at everything he does because he works hard and does not doubt himself. Like *Born on the Fourth of July*'s Ron Kovic, Gump is an allegory for America. However, that is where the similarity ends. . Gump is the ideal America--maybe dumb, but always good and always right. He serves his country, loves his mother and starts his own hugely successful business. Kovic's America has to pay the price^{of?} his^(or?) involvement in Vietnam, while Gump goes through the war unscathed. However, the price of the war is paid. In the most profound shift in Vietnam movies, this time, the price is paid by Gump's childhood friend, Jenny (Robin Wright). Jenny is, also, an allegory--for the non-"traditional" America. She is the counterculture

America. She is a stripper, war protester, prostitute, drug user and unwed mother. Through the film Gump's America and Jenny's America run independent of each other, only meeting briefly. Gump always offers to take care of her, she always rejects. This is obviously the idea that Gump's ideal America always wanted ^{to} include and "save" Jenny's counterculture America. In the end, Jenny takes up his offer, only because she is dying of AIDS and needs Gump to take care of their son. The message is that the counterculture pays for their sins (with death!) and that the ideal, traditional America has to take on their burdens (happily, though) and make right their wrongs.

Few films have ever resonated with the American populace like *Forrest Gump*. It is one of the five most commercially successful films ever and spawned its own cottage industries. Gump-mania was declared and his witticisms were oft-quoted. *Gump* struck a profound nerve in the American psyche. Why is a rather interesting question. Gump's life offers a panacea for all that was wrong with America: "America's gone through a lot, but we're still here, unchanged and better than ever." The film's quick and saccharine overview of the past 25 years is more nostalgia than critical. Americans obviously liked the message that everything is fine and we are no worse off than in the fifties. However, if America's no worse off, the question remains, is America any **better** off. Are African Americans better off? Gump's Vietnam platoon buddy, Bubba, was African American and as dumb as Gump, but he died. Are women better off? Jenny tried to break the traditional role of women and died as a direct result of her "rebellion." The conservative ideals of

traditionalism are blindly praised. There is no acknowledgment of any kind of problem that can not be solved by Gump's good-hearted common sense.

Not surprisingly, six months after *Forrest Gump* was released, the Republicans had a monumental Congressional election victory, winning control of both the House and the Senate for the first time in fifty years. They ran on a Gump-ish platform of "common sense fiscal responsibility" and "personal responsibility"--both catch phrases that sound good, but fail to recognize any depth or complexity in issues that can not be solved by common sense.

Furthermore, only two years before, Ross Perot, the closest living embodiment of Forrest Gump, got one of the highest third-party vote totals in history by spouting

Gump-ish platitudes and never showing any evidence that critical thought was taken or even needed. These two events illustrate that Americans want to be told that any problem can be fixed with common sense and hard work--critical thinking is not a requirement.

1st 1992,
who
did?

The fact *Forrest Gump* was written in the late 1970's and barely sold a copy, yet is a hugely successful movie in the mid-1990's illustrates perfectly how American values change and the media reflects and facilitates that change.

Another famous idiot savant, Peter Sellers' Chauncey Gardener, from 1979's *Being There*, was seen as a biting criticism of America's gullibility for platitudes

in the public forum. Fifteen years later, *Forrest Gump* is the model American for doing the same thing. But Americans do understand, do they not, that life is NOT a box of chocolates!

The chicken-and-egg conundrum is still an unanswerable question.

However, in the context of the media, both the chicken and the egg come first.

LC

American attitudes exist and the media keeps trying to make products that resonate with those attitudes. When they hit the mark, their product changes American attitudes and behaviors. Then they try again and the loop continues. The media's goal is to make money from American consumers and they will produce any product, intrinsically good or bad, that fulfill that goal. Americans absorb these products' and their symbolic messages, then either react for or against these messages. It's when the messages, regardless of their intrinsic value, and the methods by which they are delivered go unanalyzed that the power of the media becomes a frightening force. Propaganda can be easily mistaken for information and entertainment.

Intro much too long. Takes far too long to get to the point, which I take it is Vietnam in ^{highly selected} American commercial films.

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review
this book?